Posthumanism, New Humanism, and beyond

12. Posthumanism, New Humanism, and beyond

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In this paper, we analyse some of the issues associated with the posthumanist rejection of Humanism. First, we discuss some of the possibilities and challenges that New Materialism and the Ontological Turn have brought into archaeology in terms of understanding past ontologies and decolonising archaeological thought. Then, focusing on the concept of agency, we reflect on how its use by some posthumanist authors risks turning it into an empty signifier, which can have ethical implications and limit archaeology's potential for social critique. The concept of things' effectancy is presented as a valuable alternative to previous conceptualisations of 'object agency'. While we acknowledge the heuristic potential of many posthumanist proposals, we believe that humanist perspectives should not be rejected altogether. Instead of creating rigid divides, we argue that elements of New Humanism, as recently defined by philosophical anthropology, can hold value when facing current societal challenges.

Introduction

Posthumanism is not a homogenous concept, but rather an 'umbrella' term that encompasses a variety of approaches and schools of thought, which have in common the rejection of Humanism (Braidotti 2013; Ferrando 2013; 2019). Posthumanist approaches have contributed to challenging the numerous dichotomies pervading Western conceptualisations, such as human/non-human, nature/culture, subject/object, or mind/body. These divides have been accused of allowing the development of political strategies with lethal consequences for those on the 'wrong' side of the demarcation (Tsing *et al*. 2017).

Within archaeology, posthumanist approaches include, but are not limited to, New Materialism, symmetrical approaches and the Ontological Turn (see Crellin & Harris; Fernández-Götz *et al*., this volume). Most of them have rejected conventional Western metaphysics (Olsen *et al*. 2012) and their hierarchical ontologies, proposing instead the use of flat ones with no aprioristic assumptions; among the alternatives, those following Object-Oriented Ontologies (Harman 2018) and Actor-Network Theory inspired models (Latour 2005) enjoy a prominent place. Although new materialist and symmetrical approaches have rejected Western Humanism, they still draw their alternatives predominantly from other Western thinkers (Alberti 2016a, 140).

New Materialisms have been included within the *Zeitgeist* of 'Radical Enlightenment' and 'Spinozism' (Ribeiro 2016a, 232) and located within the neo-baroque (Criado-Boado 2016, 157). They portray a world which is understood as in motion, full of inherent vibrancy (Alberti 2016a, 141), inspired by concepts such as 'vital materiality' (Bennet 2010) or 'vibrant matter and energy flows' (DeLanda 2006).

In this paper, we would like to address some of the challenges that can arise from certain applications of posthumanist perspectives (see also McGuire; Van Dyke; Ribeiro, this volume), focusing particularly on the way they have addressed the need for alternative ontologies, the debates around non-human agency, and the problems surrounding the notion of 'things-in-themselves'. Although we recognise the potential of many posthumanist approaches, we nonetheless believe that some of their proposals and applications entail risks that should be taken into account. Rather than rejecting Humanism altogether, we think that some of its aspects, when redefined within the framework of New Humanism (Wentzer & Mattingly 2018), still hold value for the future.

Ontological challenges: The value of situatedness and the ontology of the Other

The possibility of exploring alternative ontologies is undoubtedly an attractive task for any archaeologist. However, there are some aspects to consider. As Alberti (2016b) points out, when addressing the Other's ontology, our research can be mundanely ontological or critically ontological. The first approach implies an attempt to understand non-Western (or non-contemporary) ontologies, while accepting that we are 'condemned' to use our own categories in order to understand alterity. The critically ontological approach, for its part, states that it is possible to understand other ontologies and at the same time use this very research process as a way of decolonising our own. This would lead to a more egalitarian engagement with the Other's ontology, although with the limitation of the 'ontological violence' that we exert when simplifying other ontologies in our attempt to understand them.

None of these options necessarily implies a complete rejection of Western ontologies. While we agree on the need to deconstruct and decolonise our own ontology, we believe that this task can only be partially achieved, as we cannot deny the fact that our intellectual enterprise as archaeologists is deeply embedded within our own cultural background (see also Preucel, this volume). Traditionally, archaeology has believed that situatedness and subjectivity only have corrosive effects on research processes; therefore, the only thing that one could do was to acknowledge them as a sort of honest contextualisation that could help others understand biases and how they might affect research. However, multiple authors are pointing out how

situatedness, when facing alterity and failing to comprehend it, can become a powerful heuristic tool. In this sense, Alberti (2016a, 143) has explored the role of 'wonder', while 'awkwardness' has also been popular in anthropology as a mechanism to realise that something is 'out of place' and requires further exploration (Callan 2014; Hume & Mulcock 2004). Both 'wonder' and 'awkwardness' can only come into play if we accept that our 'modern constitution' *á la* Latour (1993), is framing our understanding of the world.

Posthumanist approaches propose the rejection of the ontologies characterising this 'modern constitution', arguing instead for the use of new ontological frameworks that can challenge conventional Western metaphysics (Holbraad & Pedersen 2017, 35; Olsen *et al*. 2012). Nevertheless, with some exceptions (e.g. Cipolla 2019; this volume; Marshall, this volume), many new materialist approaches, as well as most symmetrical ones, draw their 'new' frameworks from other Western thinkers, or thinkers working within the intellectual framework of Western academic power structures and discourses (Alberti 2016a, 141; see also Van Dyke, this volume).

One of the core premises of the Ontological Turn, the notion of 'taking people seriously' (Henare et al. 2007; Holbraad 2012; Holbraad & Pedersen 2017), can also prove problematic. As noted by some anthropologists, taking the narratives of Indigenous peoples literally often implies denying them the symbolic and metaphoric capacity that Western anthropologists grant themselves (Astuti 2017). Anthropology has a long tradition of being an extractivist practice (Burman 2018), and some applications within the Ontological Turn are dangerously close to 'vampirising' Indigenous ontologies from the Global South, while at the same time maintaining the dynamics of power that place discourses from academics working at Western institutions on the top of the knowledge pyramid (Todd 2016). Thus, instead of listening to other voices and fostering debate, there is a risk that the ethnographer (or archaeologist) turns into a creator of worlds, while maintaining that the reality of those worlds cannot be discussed. This movement has been criticised as being potentially theoretically intolerant (Graeber 2015).

On agency, ethics and effectancy

The attribution of agency to non-human entities and the very meaning of the concept have been one of the main areas of dispute between some posthumanism representatives and their critics (e.g. Lindstrøm 2015; Olsen & Witmore 2015; Ribeiro 2016a, 2019; Sørensen 2016; Van Dyke 2015a). It is true that the debate has often been oversimplified, that there are notable variations within posthumanist approaches and that some scholars are now explicitly arguing for a move 'beyond agency' in favour of other notions such as affect (Crellin & Harris, this volume).

However, discussions around object agency and its implications are still playing a significant role in current archaeological thinking. To take the example of recent debates on the Roman world, Versluys has urged colleagues to follow the 'object turn' or 'material-cultural turn' in order to make "*material culture, with its stylistic and material properties (and thus agency […]), central to our understanding of the Roman world*" (Versluys 2014, 16), and to "*rewrite history as a particular relationship between objects and people with things as the agents provocateurs of (historical) change*" (Versluys 2017, 192). The shortcomings of this and similar object-agency focused approaches become evident when analysing the military-led expansion of the Roman state, which was frequently associated with episodes of mass violence, enslavement and sometimes even genocide (Fernández-Götz *et al*. 2020). Thus, Versluys's (2014, 19) proposal that "*Romanization is about understanding objects in motion*" risks obscuring or forgetting not only the human suffering caused by the military campaigns and their aftermath, but also the ethical responsibility of political leaders and the marked social inequalities existent within Roman society.

When criticising how some posthumanist scholars are diluting notions of responsibility, Ribeiro (2016a, 232) states that "*underlying this trend is a deflation of linear causation as represented by the natural sciences and of teleological reasons as represented by the human sciences*". In that sense, it could be argued that social responsibility stops having its locus in the human agent, to be transferred into a sort of amalgam of networks/assemblages (Lindstrøm 2015, 211), a movement that has received important criticisms outside of archaeology due to its potential political consequences (Choat 2018). For example, Malm (2018), a human geographer, has argued that the exclusion of intentionality from agency makes it impossible to conceive the collective action required to stop climate change, while at the same time denies the possibility of accusing those who are consciously causing the problem.

Lindstrøm (2015, 221) has drawn attention to how the 'one-size-fits-all' notion of agency applied, among others, by many symmetrical archaeologists can lead to confusing effects and acts, as well as effectants and actants. The main difference between both notions is the existence of intentionality, self-reactiveness and self-reflectiveness (Bandura 2006), which would qualify certain effects/effectants to become acts/actants. Without intentionality, it seems impossible to distinguish between effects and acts. Intentionality does not preclude unintended consequences, but it carries with it responsibility. As Ribeiro (2016a, 231; this volume) points out, this implies the agent's capacity to act (or not), and thus it is not only about producing an impact, but also about being able to understand that there might be consequences.

Following Robb (2015), we could consider that things have a type of agency in the sense that they act back on people, but this would be different from human agency. Humans have the agency of 'why' with intentional acts and effects, while things have the agency of 'how', as they provide channelled means for people to act through (Robb 2015, 168). To what extent this type of things 'agency' should still be labelled as such is open to debate. A terminological alternative is provided by Stockhammer's (2019) concept of the effectancy of things, which can serve as a useful counter-notion to human agency while at the same time avoiding the risk of anthropomorphising things.

Object fetishism and power structures

Among the main claims of symmetrical approaches (and some authors within New Materialism) is that archaeology needs to go back to 'things-in-themselves' (Olsen 2010; Witmore 2007; 2014). According to this view, archaeology has become too anthropocentric, ignoring the materiality of things and their value in themselves, analysing them only in relation to people. Although it can be argued that attending to things-in-themselves also places us in a better position to understand people-in-themselves, as they are mutually constitutive (Fowles 2010, 24), the issue arises when this tendency is taken to the extreme (Preucel 2016). After all, it is the presence of humans which defines the limits of archaeology (Lucas 2012, 259-260), distinguishing it from other disciplines such as palaeontology. The application of 'things-in-themselves' within archaeology has also been criticised on more fundamental grounds: in philosophy, where it originated, it has been argued that the concept lays beyond the reach of empirical science (Nielsen 2019).

The argument that things have not received enough attention or that archaeology has been too anthropocentric is also highly disputable. In fact, we would claim the opposite: for most of its history as a discipline, archaeology has not focused enough on humans (see also Gardner, this volume), while objects and their analysis have consistently received more consideration. This is exemplified within the culture-historical paradigm and in many processual approaches. The former (still very influential in many countries) is characterised by a widespread interest in artefact catalogues, object typologies and chronologies, often seen as the main goal in themselves within narratives that leave very little or no space for humans. Processual archaeology approaches from the 1970s-80s, for their part, were the subject of critiques by early postprocessualists who accused them of often falling into the trap of producing a 'dehumanised' past in which individuals played a rather minor role compared to statistics, systems and environmental factors.

Although coming from a very different angle than culture-historical archaeology, there is a clear risk that some posthumanist views –particularly those within the so-called 'second-wave of symmetrical archaeology' and advocating Object-Oriented Ontologies (Witmore, this volume; see also analysis in Crellin & Harris, this volume)– might lead to a new type of object fetishism or 'antiquarianism' (Barrett 2016). Characteristic of these perspectives is a shift in attention from individuals and communities to non-human entities, sometimes even without human presence. There can be no doubt that contemporary society has facilitated the creation of networks of relationships between humans, animals and objects that are denser than ever before (Hodder 2012). But this phenomenon has not come into existence out of nowhere: it has been connected with the influence that computer science is having in philosophy (Berry 2014, 103), but also, and more concerning, with the philosophical embodiment of capitalist realism (Galloway 2013, 364).

The 'defence of things' (Olsen 2010) has also adopted an ethically questionable direction in the works of some symmetrical authors. This is epitomised in Olsen's (2003, 100) statement that "*Archaeologists should unite in a defence of things, a defence of those subaltern members of the collective that have been silenced and 'othered' by the imperialist social and humanist discourses*". The issues of equating things and people as 'subalterns' have been pointed out by several authors (e.g. Fowles 2016; González-Ruibal 2006, 123; McGuire, this volume), including from within posthumanist perspectives (Cipolla 2017, 226).

The overemphasis on 'things' (or non-human beings in general) can be potentially dangerous, as it limits archaeology's scope for social analysis and critique at a time where it is more needed than ever before in light of growing inequalities and reactionary populism (González-Ruibal *et al*. 2018; Popa 2019). As pointed out by Van Dyke (2015b), the privileged position of archaeology for political engagement seems to be 'problematic' in the eyes of some posthumanist thinkers. Thus, authors within this wider framework have frequently focused on what González-Ruibal (2019) labels as 'soft politics' or 'political agnosticism', with narratives that pay little attention to issues such as class differences, power inequalities, oppression and violence. This does not necessarily need to be the case, and there are several exceptions, particularly coming from posthuman feminism (see for example Fredengren, this volume) and from those applying non-Western perspectives (Cipolla 2019). However, so far hard power structures and the darkest aspects of social life have received rather little attention by a large proportion of posthumanist archaeologists, especially within symmetrical approaches (Hodder 2014). This is, perhaps, one of the main tasks ahead. The necessity to pay greater attention to power asymmetries, even by authors in favour of object-centred perspectives, has been rightly

summarised by Jiménez (2020, 1644) in her reflection on the Roman world: "*Objects did not move in a transnational free market [...] Ignoring the power imbalance is not conducive to better insights to build artefact-driven historical narratives, and in some cases may even be misleading*".

Where are we heading? Posthumanism, New Humanism and Post-post-humanism

We believe that a complete rejection of Humanism is unproductive and potentially dangerous. To start with, critics of Humanism should acknowledge that this term does not designate a homogeneous concept. Fassin (2019), for example, distinguishes three major lineages in its genealogy, which he designates as Humanism I, II and III. As Posthumanism is an umbrella term that encompasses multiple approaches, so too is Humanism: neither of them should be oversimplified or disregarded in their entirety. Although the complete rejection of core elements of the Western world (e.g. Humanism, Modernity) might sound appealing in an academic world that often fetishises theoretical 'newness' (Ribeiro 2016b), novel reflexive critiques could often benefit from integrating elements of Modernity's legacy of knowledge and experience (Criado-Boado 2016, 157; Preucel, this volume).

It is worth keeping in mind that posthumanist perspectives are reflecting wider trends in society that are inextricably linked to the rapid growth of artificial intelligence (AI) and biotechnology, which are in the course of diluting the boundaries between humans and non-humans in ways that we can still not fully comprehend (Barrat 2013; Lanier 2014; Wolff 2017). Moreover, the rise of Posthumanism is taking place at the same time that the Humanities are increasingly under attack on a global scale, with dramatic cuts in funding and reduced social appreciation, which poses a direct threat to critical thinking and ultimately democracy (Nussbaum 2010; Trepanier 2018). While heading into an unknown future, perhaps we should keep in mind some of the core values of Humanism in a philosophical and ethical sense (e.g. Wolff 2010; 2017; Zuboff 2019).

Thus, instead of rejecting Humanism altogether and throwing the baby out with the bathwater, it is worth reflecting on the call for a New Humanism that has recently been proposed in philosophical anthropology by authors such as Wentzer and Mattingly (2018) and Simonsen (2012). According to their perspective, this would imply an approach that "*is not committed to religious or metaphysical claims concerning human essence or human superiority. It does not appeal to a secular antireligious cultural movement, nor to a developmental stage in (Western-dominated) human civilization. Rather, our proposal marks a commitment to deal with 'the human' as a common and indispensable denominator for the ontological and ethical domains*

of anthropology and adjacent disciplines" (Wentzer & Mattingly 2018, 146). Viewed from this angle, New Humanism is both a critique of some of the dangers of traditional Humanism, and also a call for caring about humans in a world increasingly facing dehumanisation (Porpora 2017), while at the same time committing to global sustainability (Bokova 2010; D'Orville 2015).

In what concerns archaeology, we argue for an approach that is focused on the study of the *human* past, not in order to reinforce obsolete notions of 'superiority' or 'progress', but to understand the non-linear, multivocal and multifaceted diversity of human experiences in time and space and its interrelatedness with non-human entities. We consider that the presence of the human is an imperative if we are doing archaeology, but we understand that humanness is constituted and performed differently through time and space, thus including a diverse and changing array of non-human entities and relationships. Archaeology, from this perspective, is not the 'discipline of things', but rather the study of humans *through* things and *in relation* to things.

Grasping the complexity and diversity of the past requires a variety of theoretical approaches and viewpoints, and most archaeologists already employ a range of perspectives to achieve this. Fluid approaches that allow for different theoretical elements to be assembled seem more inclusive and fruitful than establishing rigid divides between pro- and anti-humanist approaches. Thus, some posthumanist perspectives can be incorporated by authors who, as we do, see value in maintaining the centrality of humans within archaeological studies. Perhaps, as Fassin (2019, 37) suggests, a Post-post-humanism will develop in the near future, which "*would not be a mere return to the varieties of humanism that we have known, with their historical flaws and ethical ambiguities, but would affirm the categorical imperative of a critical approach to human worlds in a time when they are faced with multiple menaces that affect both humans and nonhumans [...]. This post-post-humanism would remind us that much of what happens to human beings and to the world that they inhabit is the result of human actions and therefore involves human responsibility – notwithstanding the ambiguity of the word human*".

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